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Colha, Belize: A Preliminary  
Statement on the 1979 Season

The Labourer's Riot of 1894  
(Part I)

Of Boats and the River

Index for 1979





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# Belizean Studies Digitization Project

## OVERVIEW

Belizean Studies was the longest running journal dedicated to social science research on Belize. The journal features research in a variety of disciplines including cultural anthropology, archeology, decolonization, diplomatic relations, photo-history, oral history, biographies, literature and book reviews. It contains the work of some of the most pioneering researchers on Belize and is considered an invaluable repository of Belize's scholarship.

## OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the digitization project are to enable wider access to the journal; assist with the preservation of original documents; encourage research; and sensitize users and the public about the importance of research for the development of Belize.



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# Colha, Belize: A Preliminary Statement on the 1979 Season

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief review of the first 1979 field season at the site of Colha, Belize. The comments offered here are greatly expanded in a publication issued by the Center for Archaeological Research, The University of Texas at San Antonio, in the late summer of this year.

Colha is located at Rancho Creek, 47 miles north of Belize City — bisected by the Northern Highway. Most of the site lies on the ranch of John and Herbert Masson, whose tremendous cooperation and friendship were invaluable contributions to the success of our first season. The 1979 season was conducted under the terms of Permit 1-79 from the government of Belize; we are grateful to Elizabeth Graham (Archaeological Commissioner) and to Mark Gutchen (Assistant to the Commissioner) for their generous assistance. The research was administered by the UTSA Center for Archaeological Research, under Hester's direction. However, other project directors from three institutions played a significant role in the project: Dr. Harry J. Shafer (Texas A & M University), Dr. Giancarlo Ligabue (Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue, Venice) and Dr. Robert F. Heizer (University of California, Berkeley). Project co-directors were Jack D. Eaton (UTSA) and Dr. Sandro Salvatori (Centro Studi e Ricerche Ligabue).

Ours was not the first investigation to be carried out at Colha. The Cambridge University-British Museum

Corozal Project, directed by Dr. Norman Hammond (now of Rutgers University), originally documented the site in 1973; at that time, a survey team prepared a map of much of the cleared portion of the site. Additional survey and mapping was done by the Corozal Project in 1975. Also during this period, and continuing into 1976, Richard Wilk (affiliated at that time with the Corozal Project) conducted extensive surface reconnaissance at Colha, tested a sacbe, and carried out a detailed controlled surface collection of a large lithic workshop. Wilk's data on these activities are contained in Hammond's interim reports in 1973 and 1976, published at Cambridge University, in Hester and Hammond (1976), and in several unpublished manuscripts.

Beginning with the first inquiries by the Corozal Project, it was obvious that Colha had been the center of intensive production of chert ("flint") tools. Literally hundreds of workshops and workshop mounds were noted across the site. Such a site, with lithic production activities of this magnitude, had not then (and has not as yet) been reported from the Maya lowlands. Thus, in April 1976, Hammond and Hester organized a field symposium devoted to a review of lithic research in the Maya area. A number of scholars participated in the session and the proceedings of this conference were subsequently published (Hester and Hammond 1976). The focal point of the field symposium was the site of Colha; one of the participants, Don Crabtree, described it as "one of the most important lithic sites in the world."

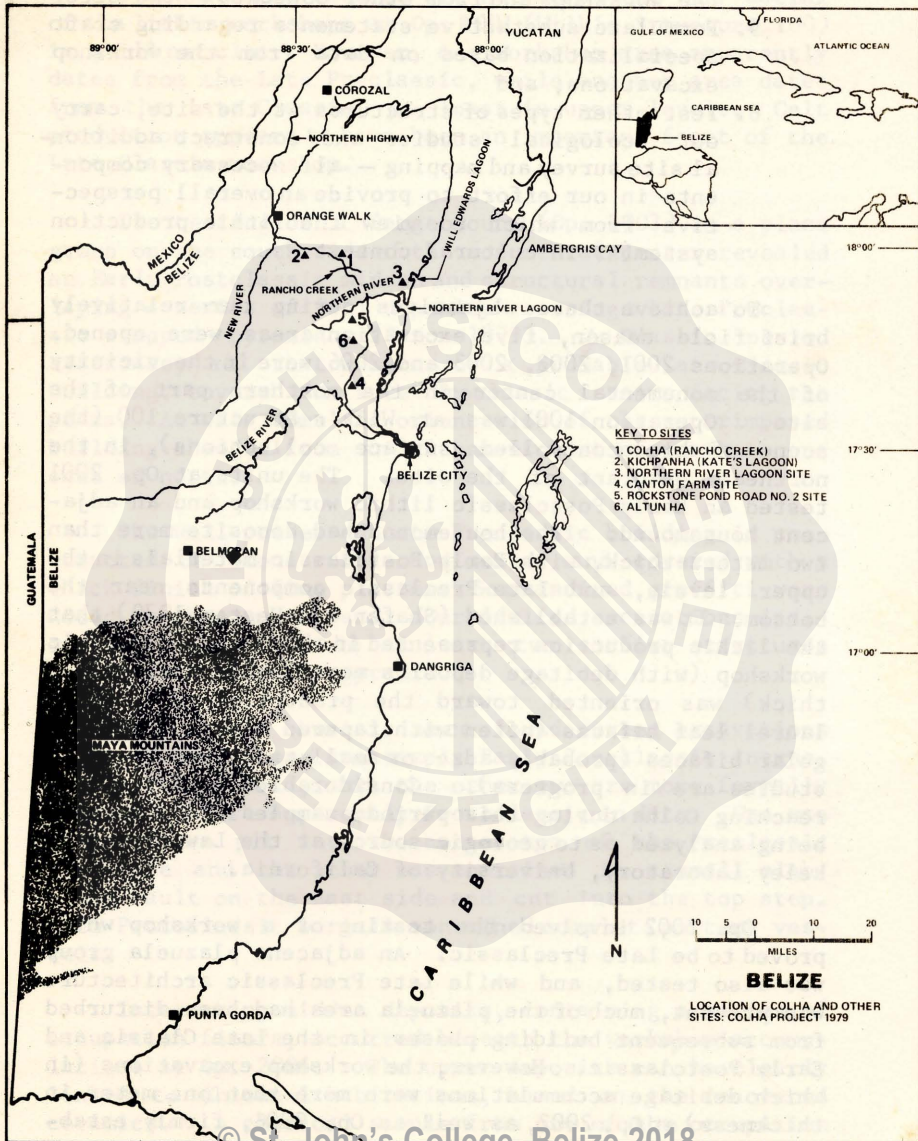
At the conference Hammond suggested that Harry Shafer and Hester look into the possibility of more intensive investigations at the site — hopefully a long-term effort which would provide data on lithic production craft specialization, an aspect of Maya life-way that is poorly known. Fortunately, in 1978, we were able to secure private funding for a two-month field season in 1979; the prospects are good for the funding of additional seasons.

During January and February 1979, the Colha Project was initiated. A field camp was constructed on the Mason property, near Rancho Creek, and a series of field investigations began.

Very briefly summarized, the first season was oriented toward six specific goals (Hester 1979; Shafer and Hester 1979):

1. Test the lithic workshops for suspected qualitative differences and variability;





2. Determine the temporal span of the workshops and evaluate the relative importance of lithic production at the site during various periods;
3. Test a sampling strategy designed to handle the vast quantities of debitage from the workshops;
4. Devise a classification and typological system to handle both debitage and lithic artifacts from the workshops and from other contexts at the site;
5. Formulate substantive statements regarding craft specialization based on data from the workshop excavations; and
6. Test other types of structures at the site, carry out ecological studies and construct additional site survey and mapping — all necessary components in our effort to provide an overall perspective from which to view the lithic production system(s) in cultural context.

To achieve these objectives during our relatively brief field season, five excavation areas were opened. Operations 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2006 were in the vicinity of the monumental center in the northern part of the site. Operation 1001 was at Wilk's Structure 100 (the scene of his controlled surface collections), in the northeast quadrant of the site. The units at Op. 2001 tested an Early Postclassic lithic workshop and an adjacent housemound. The housemound had deposits more than two meters thick, with Early Postclassic materials in the upper levels, and Late Preclassic components near the bottom. It was established (Shafer and Hester 1979) that the lithic production represented in the Early Postclassic workshop (with debitage deposits more than a half-meter thick) was oriented toward the production of thinned laurel leaf bifaces (often with tapered stems) and triangular bifaces (probably adzes or small axes; wear pattern studies are in progress). Considerable obsidian was reaching Colha during this period; samples are presently being analyzed as to geologic source at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory, University of California.

Op. 2002 involved the testing of a workshop which proved to be Late Preclassic. An adjacent plazuela group was also tested, and while Late Preclassic architecture was present, much of the plazuela area had been disturbed from subsequent building phases in the Late Classic and Early Postclassic. However, the workshop excavations (in which debitage accumulations were more than one meter in thickness) at Op. 2002, as well as Op. 2006, firmly established that a different lithic production system was present in Preclassic times. It was based largely on the



use of chert macroblades for the mass production of adzes and stemmed blades ("daggers"). Adze bits were formed by a peculiar tranchet technique, which produces a distinctive flake by-product earlier workers at the site called "orange peels." Large oval celts were also being mass produced, and "eccentrics" were being manufactured.

Since ceramic studies are not complete, the dating of the lithic workshops at Op. 1001 (Wilk's Structure 100) is still not clear. However, one workshop area apparently dates from the Late Preclassic, while another area dates from the Late Classic, at least in upper levels. Celt production appears to have been an important facet of the Late Classic workshop.

The testing of a large mound (Op. 2003) in a plaza group on the south side of the monumental center revealed an Early Postclassic midden and structural remnants overlaying a series of fill deposits covering a Late Preclassic stepped pyramid (Eaton 1979). A Classic period staircase, all that remains of a probable Late Classic building, covers the Late Preclassic stairs facing the plaza. At this time the orientation of the superimposed building changed from an alignment west of north to one east of north.

The well-preserved Late Preclassic building is constructed of stone rubble and mortar and covered with a thick finish of lime plaster. Some incised graffiti were noted on the top surface. Our limited excavations indicate that there may be at least two earlier structures contained within the pyramid.

Four human burials were found during excavations here. Two of these are simply Early Postclassic intrusions into the fill, and the other two are more formally placed and were apparently Protoclassic in date. One was an intrusive pit into the center top of the Preclassic structure and the other was contained in a small slab-built vault on the east side and cut into the top step. Both Protoclassic burials contained complete pottery vessels.

Interesting midden deposits, containing a series of occupation floors, occurred beneath the workshop accumulations at Op. 2006. The upper deposits can be clearly linked to Chicanel habitations, based on the recovered ceramics. A charcoal sample from one of the occupation areas is presently being processed at The University of Texas at Austin Radiocarbon Laboratory. Ovoid, clay-lined

pits occurred within the Chicanel occupation; fragments of thin redware pottery lined the pits. The yellow clay linings did not appear to be baked or heat-altered. Underlying levels contained midden debris attributable, again on the basis of diagnostic ceramics, to Mamon occupations. The Mamon deposits rested on sterile red clay.

A wide range of analyses is presently underway. Already it is clear that a highly organized lithic production industry was present at Colha in Late Preclassic times, perhaps operating at a more limited scale in the Classic period (although our present sample is quite limited), and with revived intensity during the Early Postclassic. Craft specialization is clearly demonstrated; a narrow range of tolerance and a high level of skill were exhibited by the ancient Maya stone-workers. There is evidence of a systematic production system, and a surprisingly limited set of tool forms being produced. However, it is clearly a mass production situation, especially in the Late Preclassic, and large quantities of adzes, celts and stemmed blades were apparently exported to other Maya centers. Other aspects of craft specialization, tool export, and the role of the Colha lithic industry in the developing Late Preclassic cultural system in the region will be the subject of continuing research.

We feel, at this early stage in our research, that certain tool sets are temporally diagnostic and may aid in the dating of archaeological deposits in the region (especially in situations where the ceramic chronology is not clear). We hope that chert trace element analyses to be conducted by the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory will help us to distinguish the cherts at Colha from those being utilized at other lithic production sites. As to the latter, we are aware of several other lithic manufacturing sites in northern Belize; project staff members have visited some of these (cf. Kelly 1979; Kelly and Valdez 1979), but none appear to match the scale of production evident at Colha. All lie within a series of chert-bearing soil types plotted by Wright et al. (1959), and the ones thus far recorded utilized cherts that are visually similar to those worked at Colha. It is thus hoped that sensitive neutron activation analyses will permit the recognition of subtle differences between the cherts at these various localities, as such differentiations are crucial to the study of chert tool exports in the lowlands area (cf. Luedtke 1978).

In closing, it should be noted that excellent faunal and paleobotanical preservation is characteristic of the



Early Postclassic deposits at the site. There is also an incredible sample of well-preserved antler chert-working tools from the Early Postclassic deposits (under analysis by Janet Stock). These studies, along with malacological work being done by Lawrence Feldman, radio-carbon dating of Preclassic and Early Postclassic charcoal samples, and other site-related research presently underway, will help us to achieve our ultimate goal of examining the lithic production systems of Colha in their appropriate cultural setting.

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